AVEBURY AVENUES

THE WAY TO DISCOVER THE STONE CIRCLE

A Complete Guide To The Avebury Complex

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'It does as much exceed in greatness... the so renowned Stonehenge... as a cathedral doeth a parish church.'

John Aubrey 1663

Map of Avebury and Surrounding Area

To Swindon (A4361)

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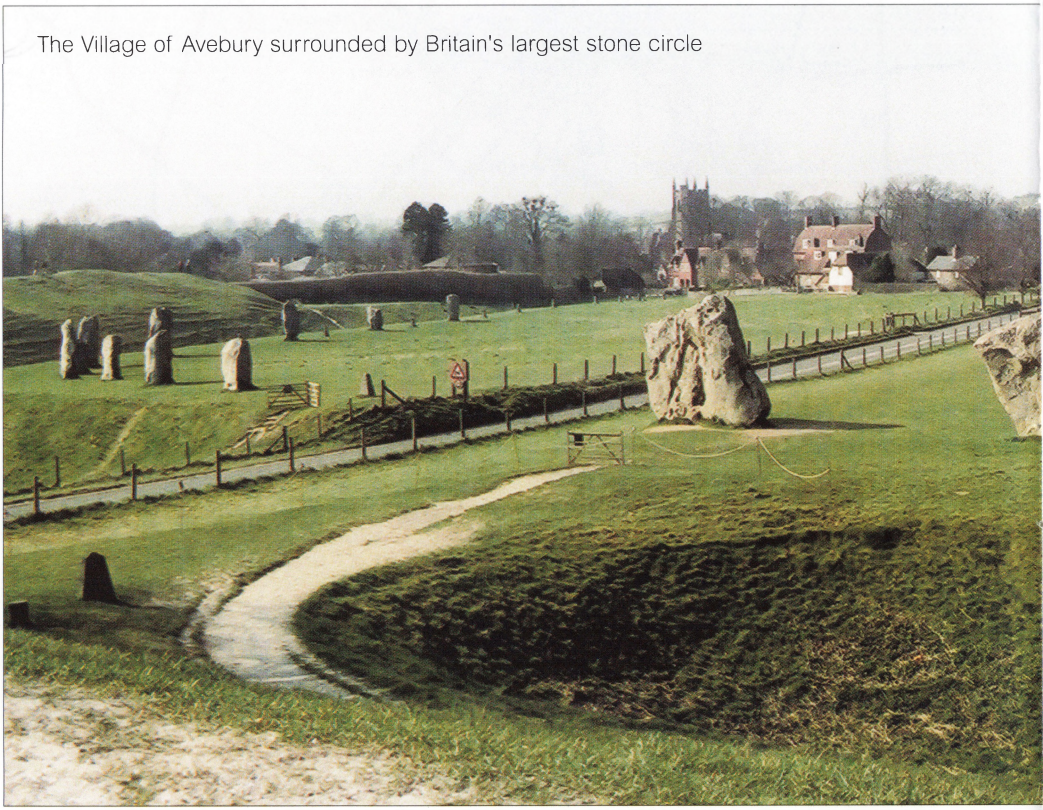
INTRODUCTION

Avebury is not Britain's best known stone circle, but being 14 times the size of Stonehenge, and predating it by around 500 years it is undoubtedly the greatest. Over the years a great deal of damage was done to the stones, some in the name of the Church and still more in the name of farming. But thankfully, due to careful restoration in the 1930s, there is still much to see as we walk freely amongst the stones.

Also, unlike Stonehenge, it does not stand in stark isolation but is the centre of a unique complex of prehistoric monuments all within a radius of 2.5km (1.5m). The settlement at Windmill Hill was located to the north-west, the large and mysterious mound of Silbury Hill to the south, the ancient burial tomb at West Kennet Long Barrow is south-east and another site, once connected to Avebury by an avenue of stones, is The Sanctuary.

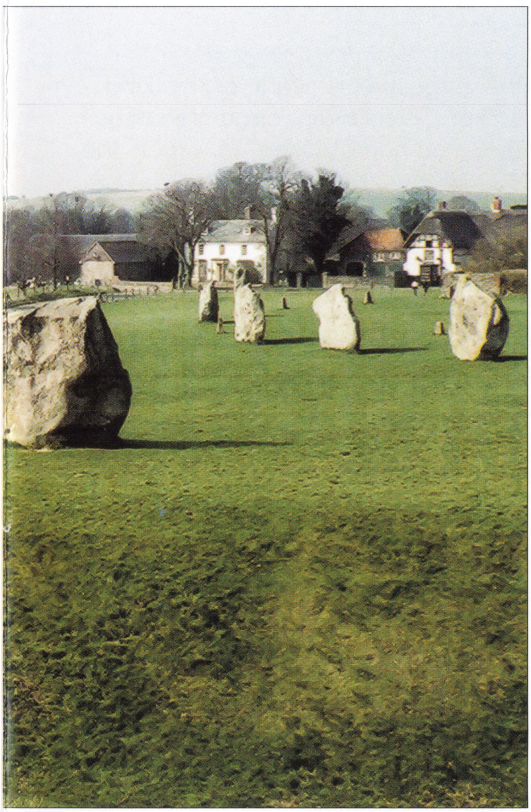
The Stone Age people who built the circle and surrounding monuments could not have just been concerned with their daily survival, but must of had a culture

The Village of Avebury surrounded by Britain's largest stone circle



that enabled them to produce these magnificent feats of engineering around 4,500 years ago.

At its prime the circular ditch measured 9 metres (30ft) deep with four causewayed entrances roughly north, south, east and west. Inside the ditch 98 standing stones made up the enormous outer ring, and inside this were two smaller circles, one containing the Obelisk, and the other a Cove. Outside the Obelisk circle stood the naturally perforated Ring Stone. And, finally, two stone processional avenues led from each of the south and west gateways.



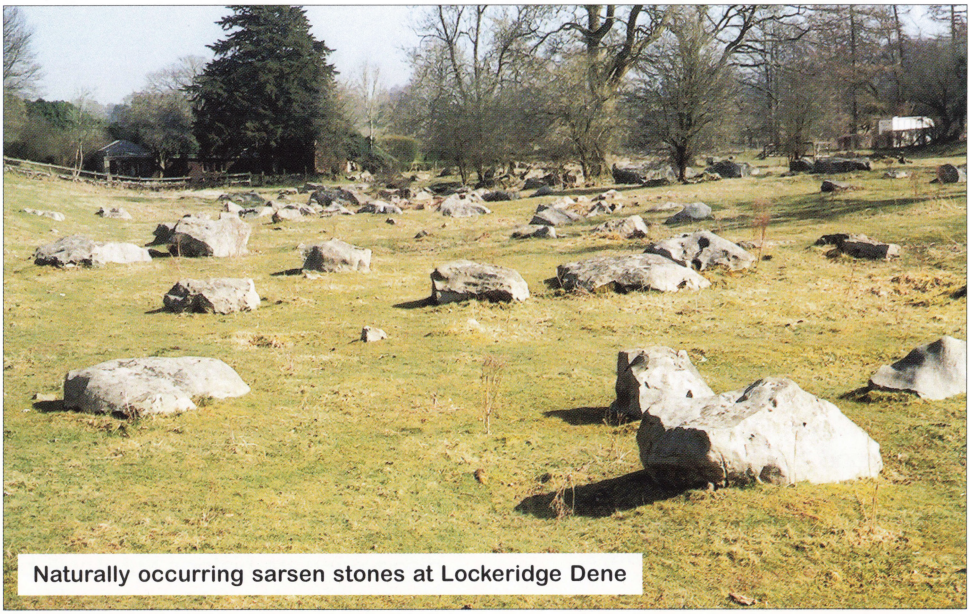
Statistics

Largest stone circle in Britain
4,500 years old
Area covered 11.5ha (28 acres)
Circumference 1.5km (1m)
Height of bank 4m (13ft)
Depth of ditch 9m (30ft)
Outer circle 98 stones
Two inner circles 30 stones each
Largest stone 7m (21ft) tall
Stones weigh between 10 - 60 tonnes
Two avenues of stones

It is an impressive monument and there has been much work discovering its history, but it will be impossible to know everything about Avebury. The process of uncovering its secrets is ongoing. Even in another 1,000 years all our questions will not be answered. Archaeology can only tell us where, how and, to a certain degree, when it was built. But what it was used for and why can only be speculated from what we already know.

However, this was obviously an extremely important gathering place, and as very little Neolithic rubbish was found here we can assume that it was not inhabited by a community, but was used for ritual purposes, perhaps as a great temple. Because these people lived in close harmony with their natural environment, ceremonies that related to the seasons and fertility were probably practised here.

King Charles II was impressed enough by its description to visit Avebury in 1663



Naturally occurring sarsen stones at Lockeridge Dene

Building Avebury

The earliest architects of Avebury did not have the completed picture of stone circles, avenues and coves in their heads when they began. But as with all old buildings it evolved over a long period of time with new generations modifying and making additions to suit their changing needs.

The henge was started around 3000 BC when the circular ditch was marked out and digging began. They used basic tools made from antlers and bone to loosen the chalk which was then loaded into wicker baskets and hauled up to form the bank. Being the largest earthwork of its kind - 1.5km (1 mile) in circumference - the man-hours taken to move the 100 thousand cubic metres (4 million cubic feet) of chalk are astounding. Certainly it would have taken more than one generation to complete.

A henge is the name of a roughly circular earthwork consisting of a ditch and bank.

The megaliths were not added until around 500 years later. These slabs of sarsen - a kind of toughened sandstone - were to be found like natural stepping-stones all over the landscape to the south and east of Avebury at that time.

Suitable stones were laboriously dragged to the site on wooden sledges over the other stone obstacles and inclines. Imagine the panic as one of the ropes snaps under the stress and the men have to dive out of the way of a tumbling sarsen. Once at the site their work

was only just beginning. Each stone, weighing between 10 and 60 tonnes, was hoisted upright into its specially dug hole, inch by inch, with wooden levers and straining ropes. Once upright, chalk was packed around the base to make it secure. It may have taken up to a year to shift and erect one of the larger stones.

The sarsens were not shaped but were chosen for their natural form, and fall into one of two categories. Some were tall, rectangular pillars, and these are thought to represent the male, while others were roughly diamond shaped symbolising the female aspect. The stones also varied in size with the largest being used for the more important features. The gateway stones, for instance, are considerably larger than most others. Quite humbling for those who entered through them.

100 thousand cubic metres (4 million cubic feet) of chalk were moved with antler picks and ox shoulder blades to create the earthwork.

Stones were dragged into position on wooden sledges.

Inside this grand outer circle were two important features. The Obelisk was largest of all the Avebury giants measuring nearly 7 metres (21 ft) tall and towered a full 2 metres (6 ft) higher than any other. Surrounded by a circle of 29 large diamond stones this colossal phallic symbol must have needed the strength of hundreds to raise into its upright position.

The Cove on the other hand was made up of three huge female stones at right angles to each other

A 'female' diamond and a 'male' pillar standing opposite each other in West Kennet Avenue

with the open side facing northeast. This too was enclosed by another smaller circle, and was sited slightly north of the Obelisk.

There is some evidence to suggest that these two inner circles may be even older than the henge as the beginnings of a third circle were discovered near the north entrance. A circle never completed, and at some point dismantled to make way for the ditch.

Sometime after the megaliths were placed work started on deepening the ditch that, when finished, measured a full 9 metres (30 ft) deep. This in turn raised the bank to around 4 metres (13 ft).

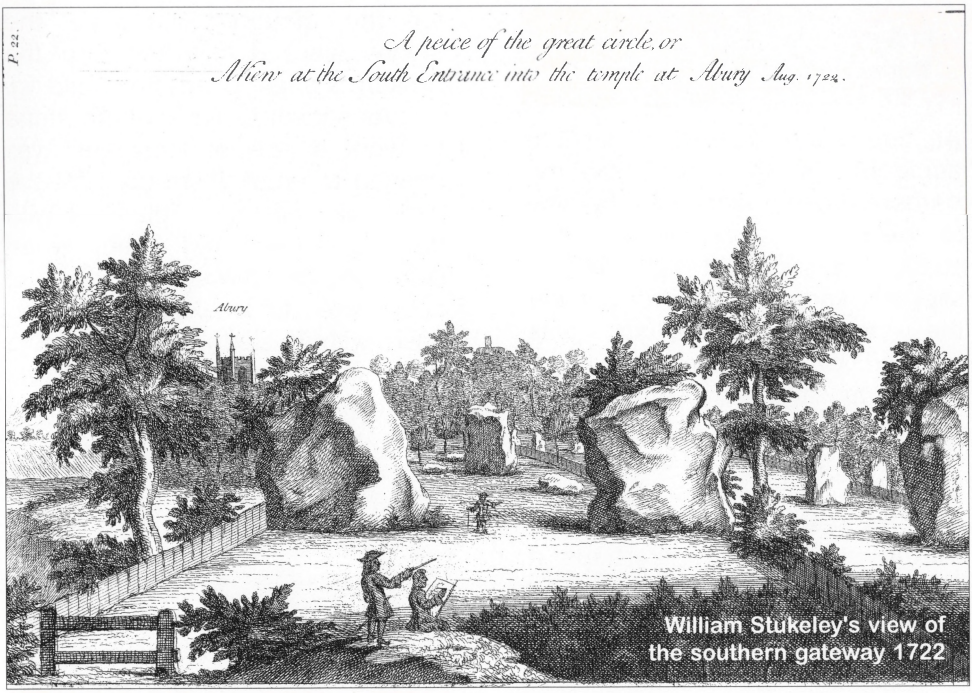
Chalk from the bottom of the enlarged ditch was used to pack the base of the Ring Stone which was raised outside the Obelisk circle. At other Neolithic sites these ring stones have been connected with fertility rites, and we have no reason to believe that this wasn't the case here as well.

Sarsen's get their name from the Anglo-saxon words 'sar' meaning troublesome and 'stan' meaning stone.

And, finally, the avenues were completed in short straight sections with the one leading from the south entrance eventually connecting to The Sanctuary over 2km (1.5m) away on Overton Hill.

The generations of labour involved with erecting this one monument alone reflects the importance that it held for its people. But, eventually, these people died out along with their rituals, and the true purpose for the circles was lost.

West Kennet Avenue



William Stukeley's view of the southern gateway 1722

Avebury's Destruction

The circles stood unused and forgotten for over a thousand years. In fact when the Romans visited during their occupation - between the 1st and 4th centuries- they would have seen the circle overgrown but more or less in its complete state.

During the Saxon invasion the natives probably used it as a defence, but by the 6th century the Saxons were making their homes within the circle. They named the henge Weala-dic meaning 'ditch of the Britons'. Their stone built church made an appearance in the 10th century and was, significantly, sited just outside the pagan temple.

The Romans would have seen the circles in their entirety.

Yet, by the late 13th century, Christianity was becoming more powerful and it decided that pagan symbols could no longer be tolerated. It decreed that the stones should be torn down and destroyed.

But the inhabitants of Avebury may have feared the Devil's retribution because the stones were not destroyed, but were painstakingly buried in pits. This went on for some time maybe as the highlight of an annual stone felling festival.

In the Middle Ages stones were buried to appease the Church.

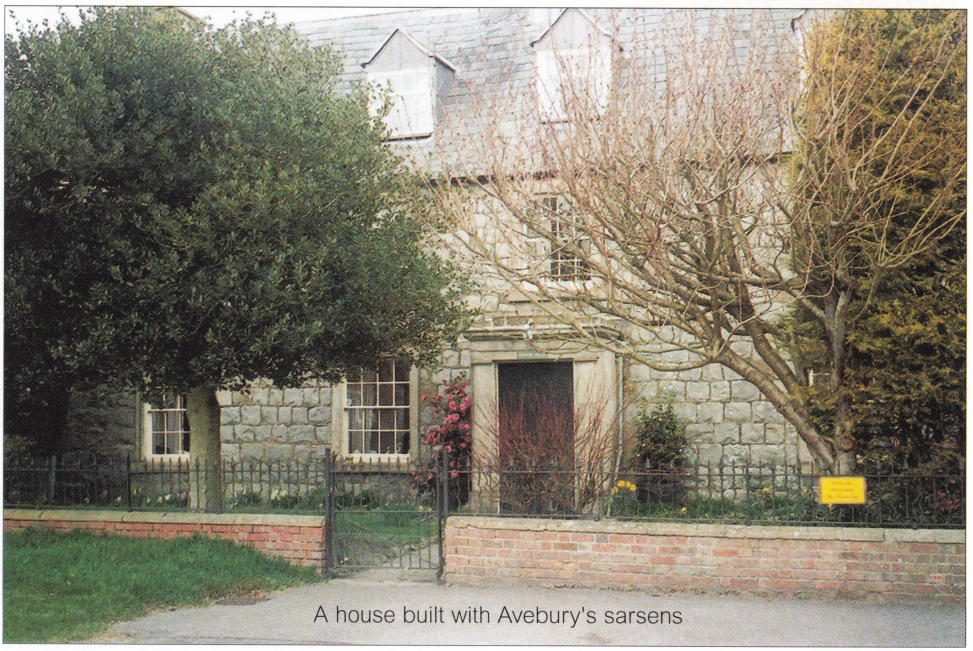
At one such festival a terrible accident struck a travelling barber-surgeon who was helping to overthrow a stone. As the sarsen was about to fall he slipped, and, too late to prevent the stone from falling, was crushed by its enormous weight. There was little point in trying to prise it off again, and, as a result, he lay in a grave of his own making for more than 600 years.

This seemed to signal the end of the stone burials. Perhaps it terrified the villagers into thinking that the Devil did have something to say about it after all.

Sometime later in the second half of the 17th century the stones began to be cleared to make way for the plough. This time the stones were demolished and the broken stones used for building.

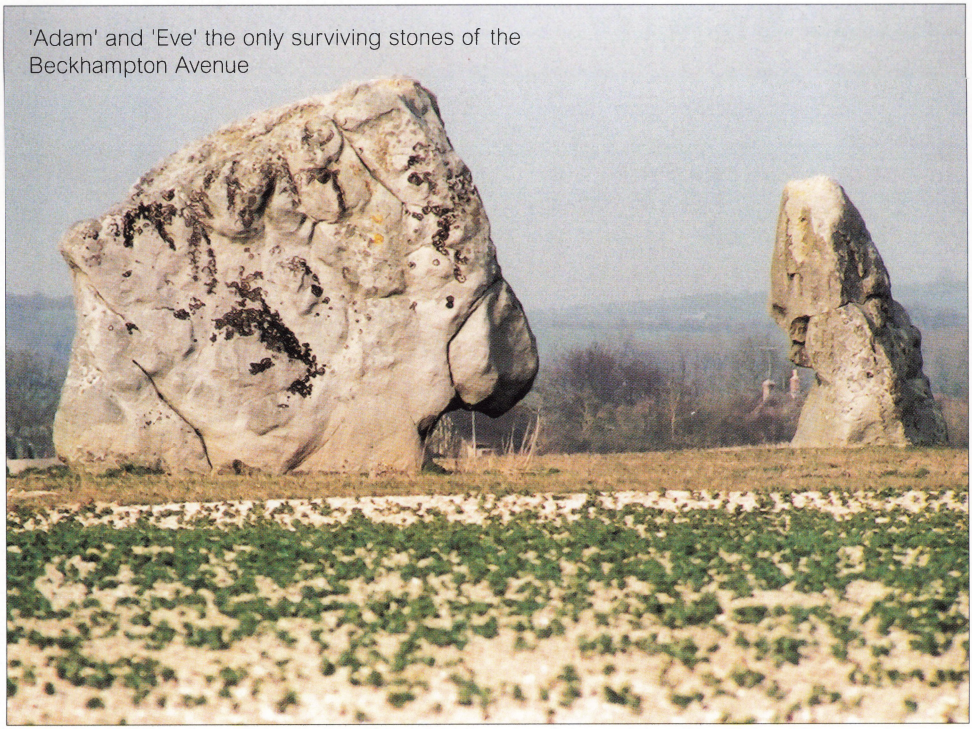
As sarsen is such a hard stone to work a special technique was needed to break them up. First the stone was placed in pit filled with burning straw, and then, when scorching hot, dowsed with lines of cold water to weaken it. A good bash with a sledgehammer would then shatter it into manageable building blocks. The evidence of these stones is all around in the houses and walls of the village. Notice how some of it has reddened from the fire and water process.

The stone burials stopped after a barber-surgeon was tragically crushed beneath a stone.



A house built with Avebury's sarsens

'Adam' and 'Eve' the only surviving stones of the Beckhampton Avenue



It was at the height of this destruction that William Stukeley came upon Avebury and realised that it was an important ancient site. Even so, the clearance continued despite his protests. He recorded what he saw in detailed sketches marking stones as they fell. Although the mighty Obelisk had already fallen, perhaps unaided, before he arrived he was witness to its incredible size before it too was tackled and broken.

He also surveyed the Beckhampton Avenue nothing of which remains today except two stones, named Adam and Eve, standing in a field near the roundabout.

The years of destruction had taken their toll on the monument. The remaining stones were very overgrown and obscured by derelict buildings and farm rubbish. Any visitor would have had trouble realising that there was a monument here at all.

Alexander Keiller was appalled by the neglect and bought the site in the early 20th century to re-establish it as the greatest stone circle in Britain.

From the 17th Century stones were broken up using fire and water and used for building.

William Stukeley

William Stukeley was a doctor and a clergyman who was interested in antiquity. After learning about Avebury from John Aubrey's writings he decided to visit, and eventually spent five years meticulously recording and studying what he found.

He arrived in the village in 1719 when it was growing rapidly, and the stone breaking was at its most destructive. He could not prevent what was happening, and realising the circle was important, mourned the loss of each stone as it fell. He resolved to draw it before it completely disappeared.

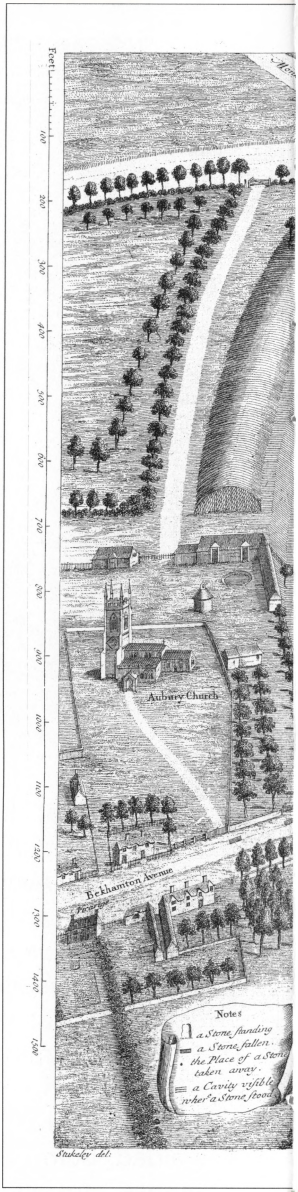
In his search for detail he learned a great deal about the stones observing that the largest stones were used for gateways and other important focal points. Also, he was the first to notice that the stones had a rough and a smooth side and that the 'better' smooth side always faced inwards.

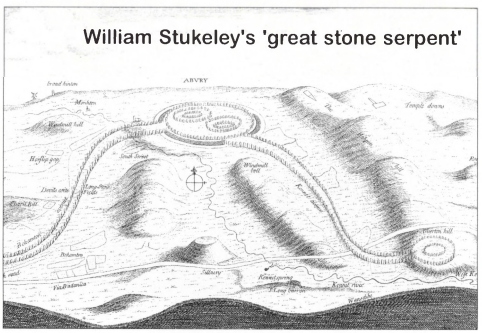
Previously it was thought that these carefully laid out stones had been of Roman origin but Stukeley rightly supposed that they were much older than this. He began to speculate who had erected them and why. After getting so much right he then mistakenly attributed the building of Avebury to the druids - a discrepancy of around 2,000 years.

During his later years at Avebury he became obsessed with druidism, and his drawings became distorted to fit in with his ideas. His contemporaries did not take him seriously and consequently his work was disregarded by historians for a long time.

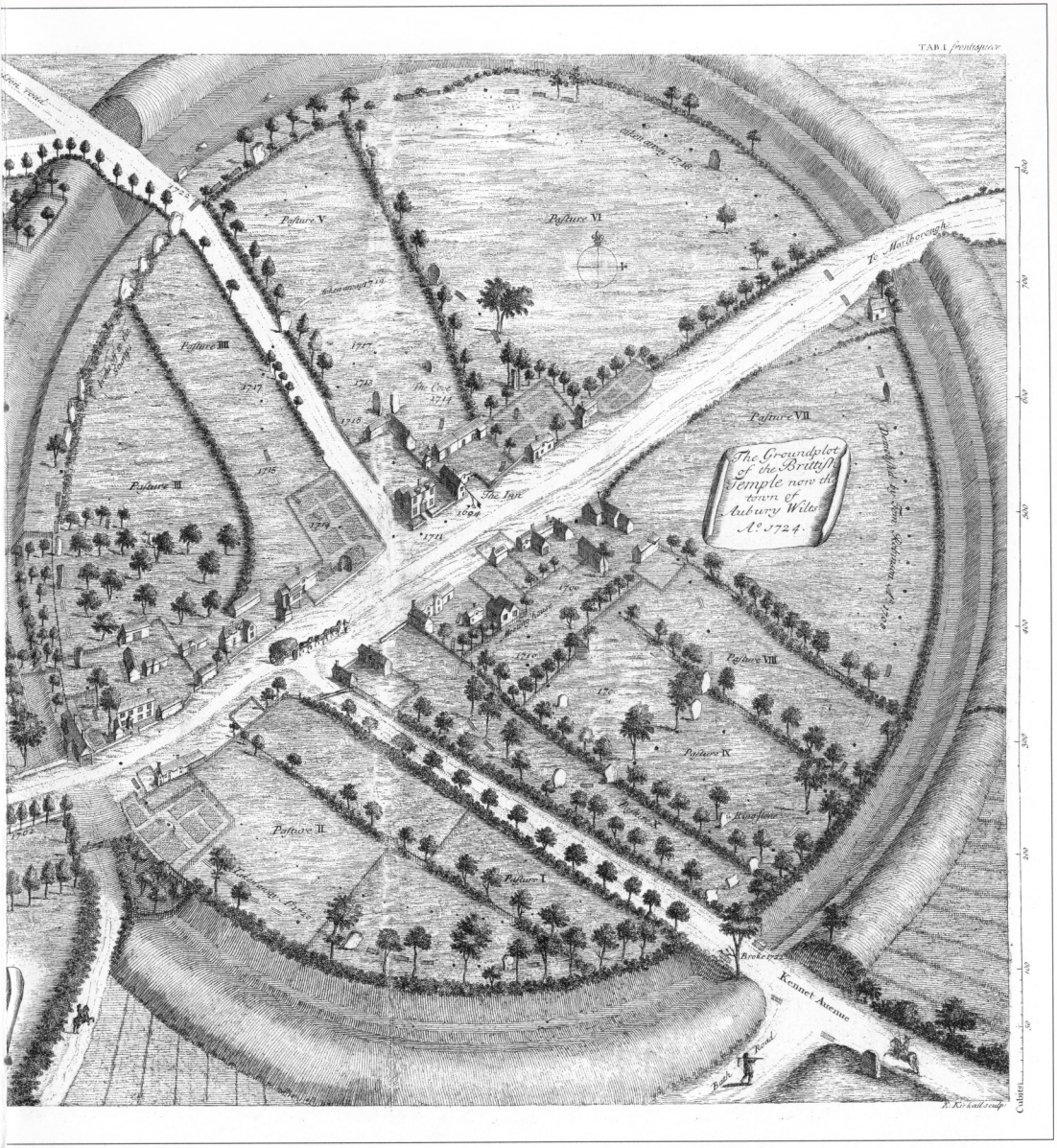
More recently though his drawings have helped archaeologists to visualise and understand Avebury's history. Alexander Keiller, the archaeologist who in the 1930s reconstructed some of the circle, was in possession of his earlier sketches and writings and used them to aid his work.

They have also proved invaluable to more modern archaeologists in locating features such as the





William Stukeley's 'great stone serpent'



William Stukeley's ground plot of Avebury 1724

Beckhampton Avenue. This was thought to have only existed in Stukeley's imagination as the tail of his 'great stone serpent'. But recent excavations have proved it to have been a reality although its picture opposite is somewhat stylised.

Before William Stukeley came to Avebury, the circles were thought to have been built by the Romans.

Alexander Keiller

Alexander Keiller is regarded by some as the saviour of Avebury.

Born in 1889 in Dundee, he became a pioneering archaeologist who cared passionately about the fate of Avebury. His extensive work carried out during the 1930s was entirely funded from his personal fortune inherited from his family's marmalade business.

Avebury was littered with derelict buildings and farm rubbish, and his dream was to clear the circles of clutter and return them to their original splendour.

He eventually bought the village and moved from London into Avebury Manor.

Apart from archaeology Keiller's passions included skiing, fast cars and women.

He employed local labourers to help clear the debris and uncover the buried stones, some of which were over a metre below the surface. The original stone holes were located and the megaliths were returned to them and securely cemented in.

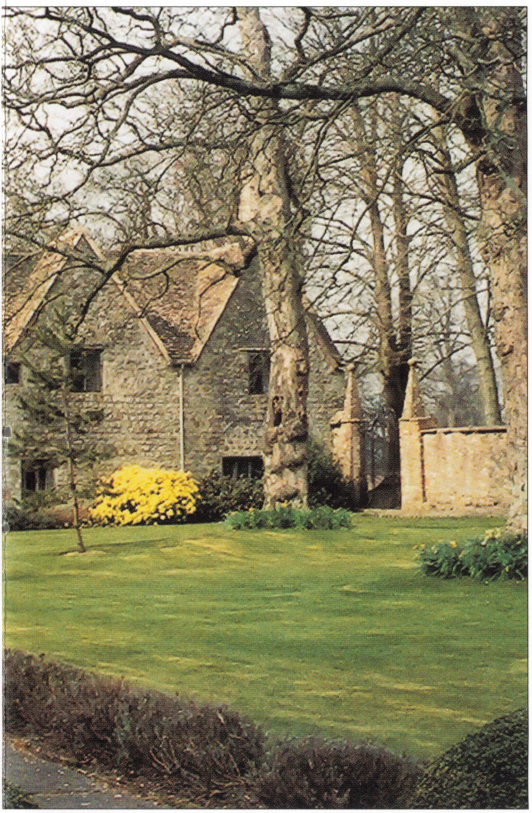
His work became controversial when the villagers learned the full extent of his plan. They were glad of the work he provided in times when jobs were scarce, but the

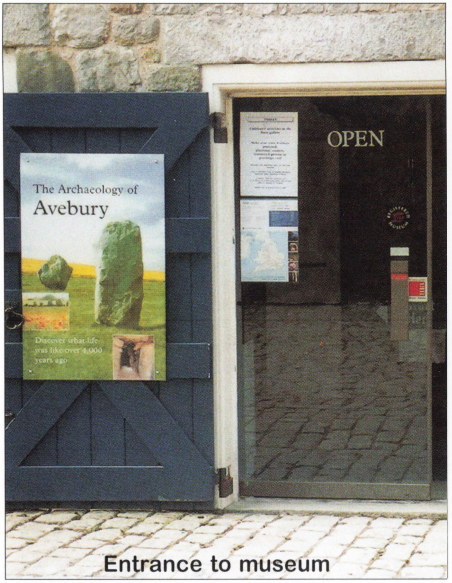
Avebury Manor - Former Home of Alexander Keiller

proposal to demolish their homes and relocate the inhabitants to brand new houses at Avebury Trusloe did not meet with everyone's approval. One villager recorded that two thirds of the village was torn down before he stopped.

His excavations included a third of the West Kennet Avenue, the north-west quarter and the south-west quarter. His attention concentrated on the inner circle of the south-east quarter, but a diminishing fortune coupled with the onset of war meant it was never completed leaving many questions unanswered.

Yet his work has left us with a magnificent monument that would almost certainly have disintegrated into obscurity had it not been for his tireless dedication.





Entrance to museum

Before he died in 1955 he sold Avebury to the National Trust. They offered £12,000, which he agreed to because he knew that Avebury would be in safe hands. But this sum only represented the agricultural value of the land, and was a fraction of the £50,000 he had invested in it (equivalent to an excess of £2 million today).

The Alexander Keiller Museum was founded by him in 1938, and is home to his finds from his Windmill Hill and Avebury excavations. Now also maintained by the National Trust it is located in the old stables near his former home Avebury Manor.

Alexander Keiller spent the equivalent of £2million of his own money on Avebury.

The south-west quarter

Walking Tour of The Circle

Approximately 1½ km (1 mile)

The broken Blacksmith's Stone

South-West Quarter

Begin at the gate to the side of the Henge Shop. This graceful arc of stones is one of the most complete sections of the circle restored by Alexander Keiller in the 1930s. Faced with an overgrown ruin he painstakingly located the stones that had been buried in medieval times to appease the Church, and re-erected them into their original sockets. He used concrete markers to indicate the stones that had later been cleared for farming and used for building in the village.

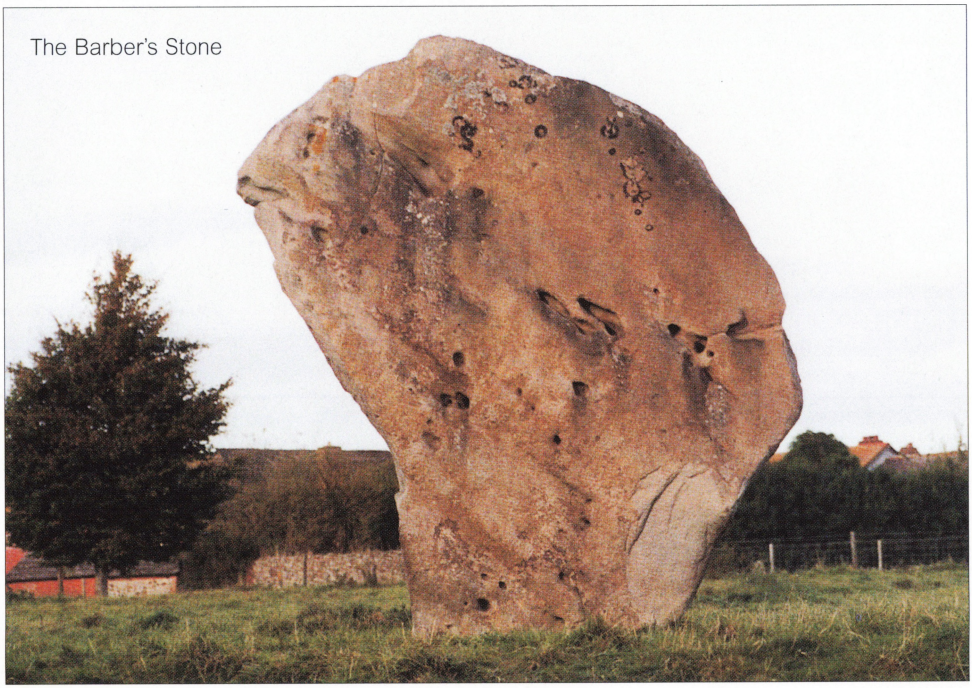
The first stone inside the gate is a scarred survivor of that period. Now an incomplete shadow of its former self it was once a magnificent giant, and one of a pair that guarded the west entrance to the circle. The remaining fragments were recovered from the old

blacksmith's forge, and were glued and bolted together again before being returned to its former position. If you look closely you can still see the blacksmith's iron wedge, used to try and split the stone, jammed near the base.

Move along to the sixth remaining stone in the arc, known as the Barber Stone, and to the site of a medieval tragedy. For while this stone was being toppled into a burial pit one of the men was crushed beneath it as it fell. Little did he know, as he helped dig the hole, that he was actually digging his own grave. Too heavy to lift, the stone was left where it was and buried. It was not until around 600 years later when the stone was raised again that his skeleton was discovered, and with it was a pair of scissors, an iron probe and three silver coins. These items indicated that he was probably a travelling barber-surgeon, and, ever since, this unfortunate soul has been known by this name.

Avebury was a striking white monument in a fertile green landscape for many years before the grass took hold of the chalk.

The strange dip in the bank is not an original feature, but where road builders dug into it for earth to raise the level of the road. After exploring the rest of his section use the gate to carefully cross the busy road, and enter the south-east quarter.



The Barber's Stone

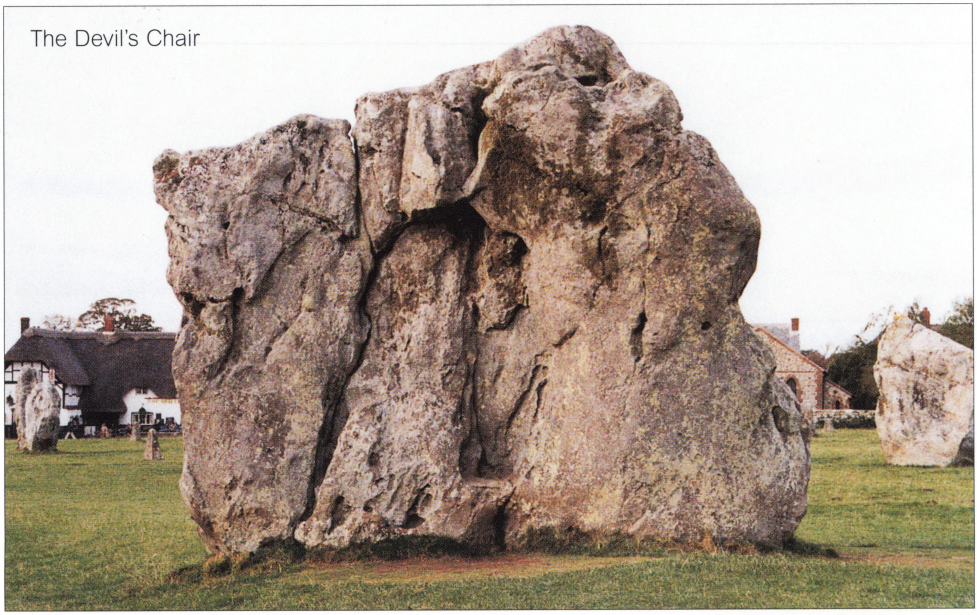
South-East Quarter

At first it is difficult to make sense of this jumble of stones. This is because it was only partially excavated by Keiller before he was interrupted by the War. It is supposed that there are still many stones still lying beneath the ground waiting for future archaeologists to discover.

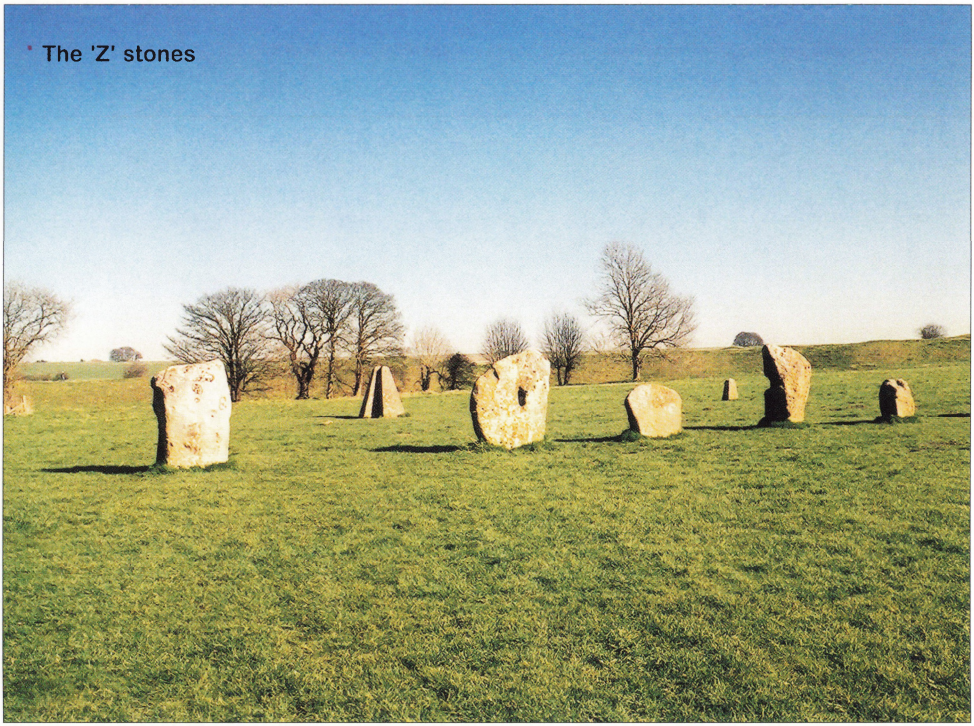
The arc of five large stones joined by four concrete markers are the remains of the 29 stones of the southern inner circle. At the centre is a large fluted marker that shows us where the imposing Obelisk once stood flanked by the smaller, mysterious, 'Z' Stones. This supposed phallic symbol was recorded by William Stukeley as towering over two metres (7ft) taller than any other stone at Avebury.

The Obelisk was the largest stone of all and is thought to have been a phallic symbol.

Walk parallel to the road towards the two impressive stones that are the south gateway. The stone on your right is known as the Devil's Chair the reason why will become apparent as you turn and look at it from the other side. The natural seat in this stone has been the resting place for countless visitors and an ideal photo opportunity. But take care as you sit because if it is raining the water is funnelled down from above onto your head. This 'chimney', according to local legend, has also been known to issue smoke. And, in another story, the Devil himself can be summoned by running around the stone 100 times in an anti-clockwise direction.



The Devil's Chair



The 'Z' stones

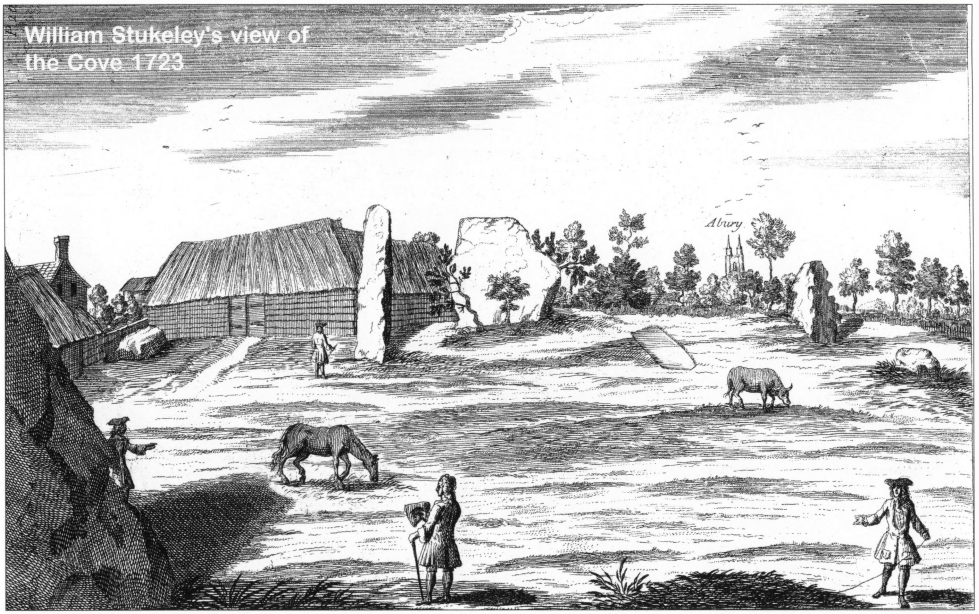
Presumably these devil stories grew up to dissuade God fearing Christians from visiting the stones.

Climb up onto the bank and view the scene from above. The pattern becomes a little clearer from this position, and you can see the broken stump of the fallen Ring Stone.

Turn and look behind you to see West Kennet Avenue disappearing over the low hill. These pairs of stones once stretched for 2.5 km (1.5 m) to the Sanctuary on Overton Hill, and were used as a processional way to, or possibly from, the circle on special occasions. This part of the avenue was the first project Keiller undertook at Avebury. He resurrected a third of it, and discovered a pattern of opposing stone shapes with each pair he reinstated. There is a gate to cross the road and explore the avenue if you wish.

Rejoin the circle and walk all the way around the bank until you reach the two fallen megaliths under the trees noticing as you do the ridges that were field boundaries in Stukeley's time. At the end of the bank is the gate to gain access to the next quarter.

Stories of the Devil grew up around the stones to deter Christians from the pagan circles.



William Stukeley's view of the Cove 1723

North-East Quarter

The road you have just crossed was the circle's main entrance for travellers and traders in Neolithic times, and still leads to the ancient Ridgeway Path on top of the hill. The Ridgeway was an important trading route, and perhaps its presence was a factor in deciding where to build the henge.

Today, to come from the Ridgeway on foot down this quiet lane is still one of the most pleasing ways to enter Avebury.

Once across the lane you are now in the north-east quarter.

Travellers and traders would have used the eastern gateway as the main entrance into the circle.

The first fallen giant on your left was a gateway stone and one of the very few remaining megaliths in this sector. The ones that are visible though have not been moved since their erection. This is the one quarter that has not been excavated and you can see what a thorough a job the religious zealots and farmers have done. Hopefully the Christians managed to bury some of the stones before the farmers got to them, and so, in a perverse twist of fate, saving them. But for the moment they lie beneath the soil awaiting future archaeologists.

If you look closely at the inner side of the bank you may be able to see the shelf that stopped soil falling from the top of the bank into the ditch below. This feature is know as a berm, and is particularly clear in this part of the circle.

Behind the buildings are two large stones standing at right angles to each other. This Cove was once made up of three proud sarsens standing in a U-shape. The open side faced north-east, and may have been roughly aligned with the most northerly moonrise.

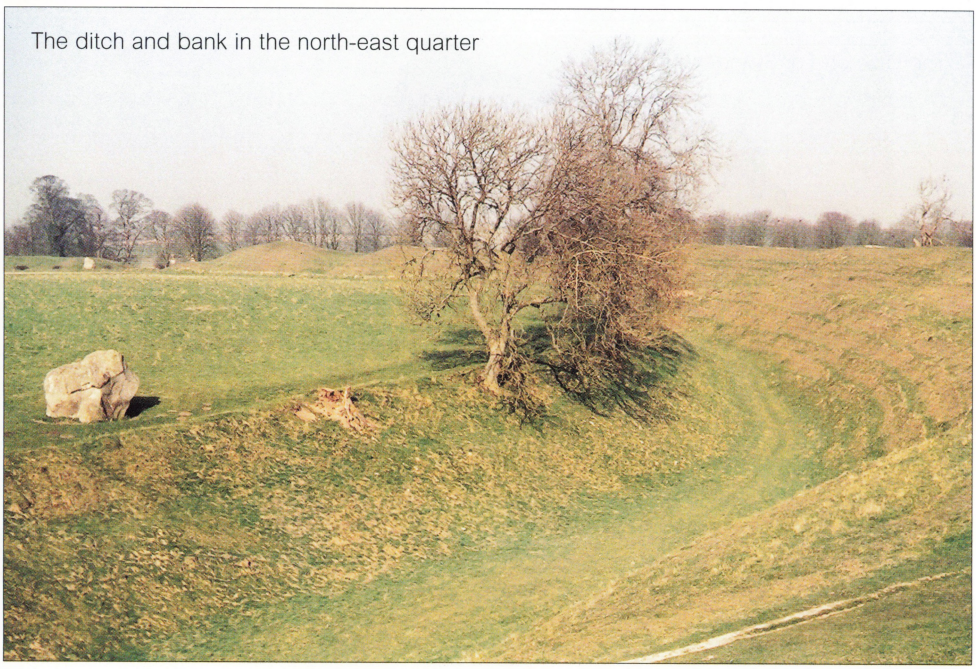
It was surrounded by the northern inner circle, which had a diameter of approximately 98 metres (320 ft) and consisted of 27 stones. The modern road ploughed right through it, which left some of them in the north-west quarter.

The Cove's open side faced north-east towards the moon's most northerly rising point.

There are probably many undiscovered stones still lying buried beneath the surface.

Where the 'Z' Stones flanked the Obelisk so a second smaller circle skirted the Cove. If we consider that the Obelisk circle represents the male gender then this must surely be the opposing female circle.

The gate to exit this quarter is situated behind the bank, and again, please take care crossing the busy road.



The ditch and bank in the north-east quarter

North-West Quarter

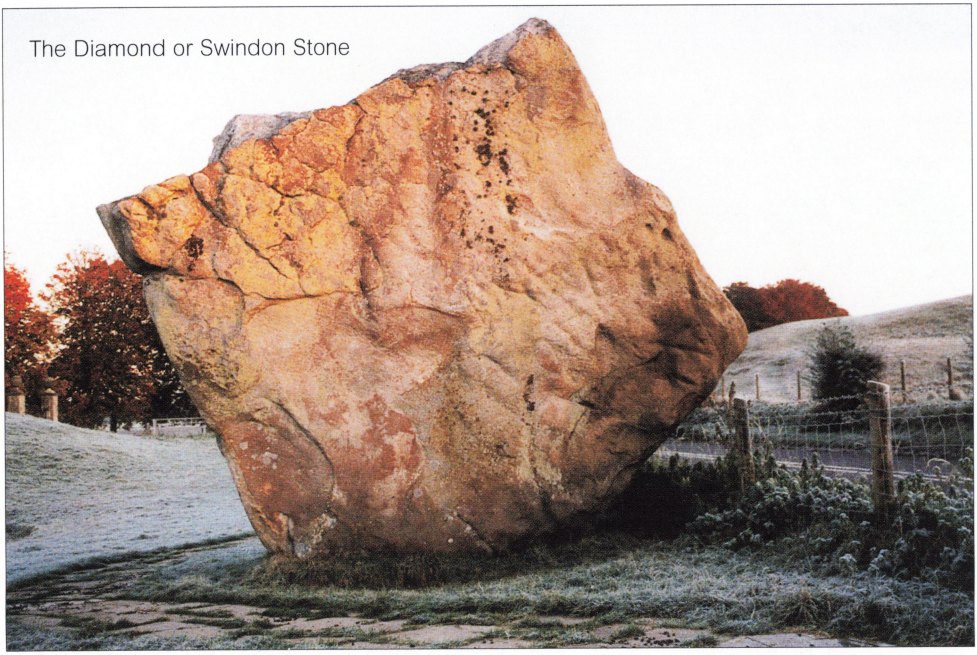
The most striking stone in this area is the Diamond or Swindon Stone that is precariously balanced on one of its corners and overhangs the road. People, especially children, can often be seen giving it a wide birth to avoid walking under it just in case it should suddenly fall. It is one of the north gateway stones, and also has mysterious stories associated with it.

Local legend will have you believe that it crosses the road at midnight in search of its missing partner. Another tale tells that, again, at the stroke of midnight it spins through 360° on its axis. But in fact this stone has not moved for over 4,500 years, and as one of the few to remain standing in its original position it is unlikely to do so now.

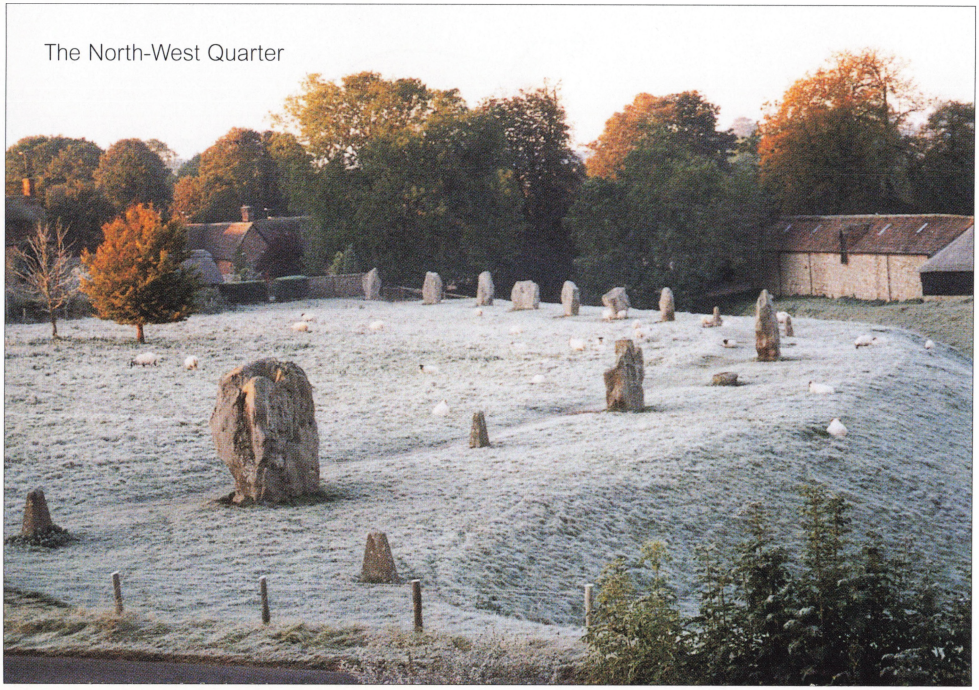
The Diamond stone is said to cross the road at midnight to look for its lost partner.

The concrete marker next to the Diamond Stone shows where Keiller found a stone hole but strangely it is far to close to it for a stone to have stood here at the same time. Behind it are two more, and these are thought to have been the beginnings of a small circle that was then dismantled to make way for the ditch.

Curiously, if the circle had been completed a hypothetical straight line would pass through the centre of each of the three small circles.



The Diamond or Swindon Stone



The beginnings of another small circle was found here and predates the ditch and the bank.

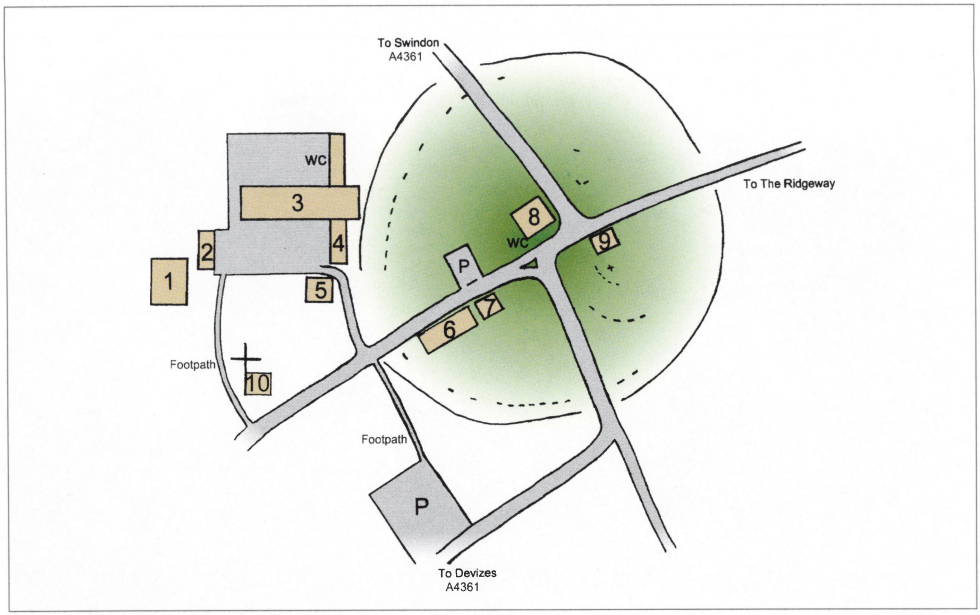
This was the first quarter that Keiller restored, and he discovered eight buried stones some over a metre (4 ft) below the surface. He returned them to their sockets, and set about clearing the overgrown areas sometimes resorting to carefully controlled explosives to remove stubborn roots.

One part he didn't rectify was the bank, which was cut into to make room for the Great Barn. The Lord of the Manor did this in the 17th century and had little regard for the old earthwork.

When you come to the end of this final section, and descend the steps, notice the ditch continues round beside The Granary (now The National Trust Shop) and into the gardens beyond. The stone circle stops much shorter due to the buildings. No doubt Keiller had planned to pull these down to get to the stones beneath. The National Trust now has a policy of retaining the houses as part of Avebury's history and has no intention of removing any more.

From here you can turn left to return to the High Street, or right to explore the Alexander Keiller Museum, The Great Barn, St James Church and, perhaps, visit the Café.

Some of the Cove circle stones extended over the road into the north-west quarter.



Avebury Village

The Manor (1)

Avebury Manor was built during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I on the site of a 12th century Benedictine priory, and has been regularly added to and updated over the years. The grounds are particularly attractive with interesting topiary and several walled gardens. Watch out for the hooded monk who is said the haunt the grounds.

Opening hours are limited so please check to avoid disappointment.

Alexander Keiller Museum (2)

This National Trust museum is situated in the stable block near to the Manor entrance. Founded in 1938 by Keiller himself it is home to his collection of finds, and provides a fascinating insight into the archaeology of Avebury and surrounding monuments.

The Great Barn (3)

Part of the henge bank was levelled in the 17th century to build this thatched threshing barn. The large doors at either end were to enable a horse and full wagon to enter at one end, unload, and leave through the other without having the inconvenience of turning around.

Inside it now is the National Trust exhibition 'Avebury 6000 Years of Mystery'.

The Dovecote

The small circular building with no windows is a dovecote. The birds

enter through the opening in the roof, and inside nest in one of the hundreds of nesting holes that line its walls. It belonged to the Manor, and the birds were used as a source of fresh meat for the Lord during the winter months.

The Dovecote

The Circle Café (4)

In the old stable block adjacent to the barn is the National Trust café. They open for coffee, lunches and afternoon teas.

National Trust Shop (5)

Housed in the old Granary, near to the cafe, is the shop that sells the Trust's range of quality gifts. Here you can also become a member of the National Trust and gain access to their properties all over the country.

The Henge Shop (6)

Next to the post office is the Henge Shop. An excellent place for quality gifts, cards and guides. It also has an interesting book section including an extensive range of archaeological publications.

The Post Office and Shop (7)

The local village store that sells stamps, groceries, snacks and drinks.

The Henge Shop

St James Church

The Red Lion (8)

Public house situated on the cross roads at the centre of the stone circle. At night a ghostly horse drawn coach has been known to clatter across its cobbled forecourt. During the day though it is an ideal place to sit and enjoy a drink when the weather is fine.

The millstone and cider press in the corner of the car park are for decoration only, and have never been used in the village.

Inside the thatched building are old beams, a large fireplace and the old well that can still be peered into.

Tourist Information Centre (9)

The Chapel on Green Street was built in the early 18th century from the circle's broken stones. It is the only Church building to have been raised inside the pagan circle.

Nowadays it is home to the Tourist Information Centre although services are still held on some Sundays.

St James Church (10)

The Church can be dated back to before the Norman Conquest (1066) and has been subjected to numerous additions and alterations. A particularly rare feature is the rood loft that survived the Reformation by being hidden behind plaster. It was not until 1810 that it was rediscovered and restored. The font is around a thousand years old and part of the original church although it was an unadorned stone tub at that time. The rather amateur carving on it wasn't done until around the 12th century.

Windmill Hill

The site is approximately 2.5 km (1.5 m) north of Avebury and can be reached on foot by heading west down the High Street and then following the footpath until it reaches Bray Street. This leads to the track that takes you to Windmill Hill.

Alternatively by car, turn right out of the main car park and then take the next right to Avebury Trusloe. Continue to the end of the road and turn left into Bray Street where there is limited parking. Follow the track up the hill.

Windmill Hill is of one of the largest causewayed enclosures in Britain, which was inhabited by early farmers and traders many years before Avebury was built. Situated on a low hill it covers an area of 8.5 hectares (21 acres) and is an arrangement of three irregular rings of ditches. There is not much left to see today, but once the outermost ditch was over 2 meters (7 ft) deep.

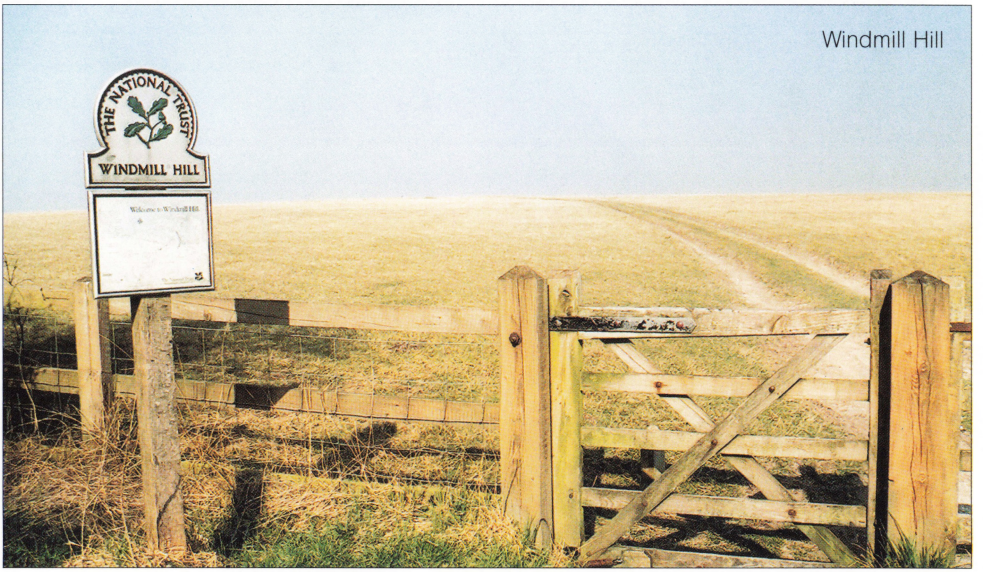
Seashells and 'foreign' pottery suggest that the people who lived here were traders.

It came to Alexander Keiller's attention in 1924, and, after finding out that it was going to be developed, decided to buy it and investigate further.

He paid particular attention to the ditches where he found broken arrowheads, antler combs and whelk shells along with human skulls and long bones.

Other interesting finds included chalk phallic symbols leading us to believe that fertility rituals played an important part in the lives of the people who lived here.

An exhibition of these artefacts can be seen at the Keiller Museum in Avebury.



Windmill Hill

Silbury Hill

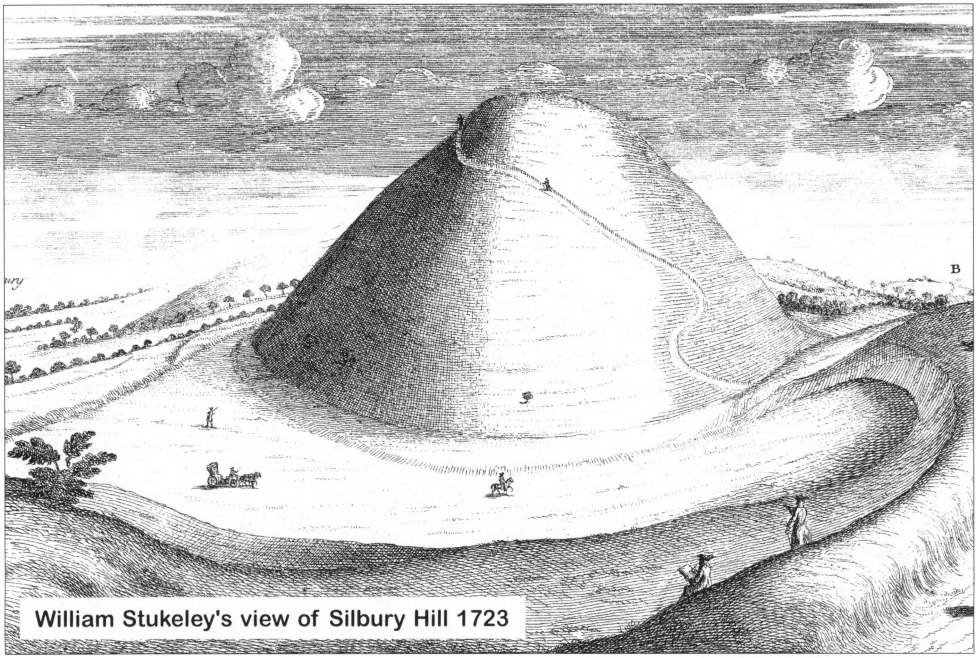
Silbury Hill lies approximately 1.5 km (1 mile) to the south of Avebury and can be reached on foot by the path opposite the main Avebury car park. Alternatively by road, turn right out of the car park to the roundabout. Take the first left and continue until you reach the Silbury car park and viewing area. The Hill is an English Heritage site and is also a site of Special Scientific Interest, which means the climbing of the hill is strictly forbidden.

After two centuries of investigation the purpose for Silbury Hill still remains a mystery. Modern romantics have ideas of it being a Mother Goddess, a grand water feature or even used in theories involving astro-archaeology.

For many years Silbury was thought to be a burial mound.

For a long time the most reasonable explanation was that it was a larger version of the round barrows, used for burials, that can be seen throughout the area. These burial mounds were plundered for their treasures. It was assumed that, as Silbury was so large, it was built for a very important person and so would contain treasure beyond most people's dreams. Perhaps Europe's equivalent of an Egyptian pyramid.

There is a story of King Sil (or Zel) being buried in the mound on his horse and over many years it turned into a legend of life-sized gold figures.



William Stukeley's view of Silbury Hill 1723

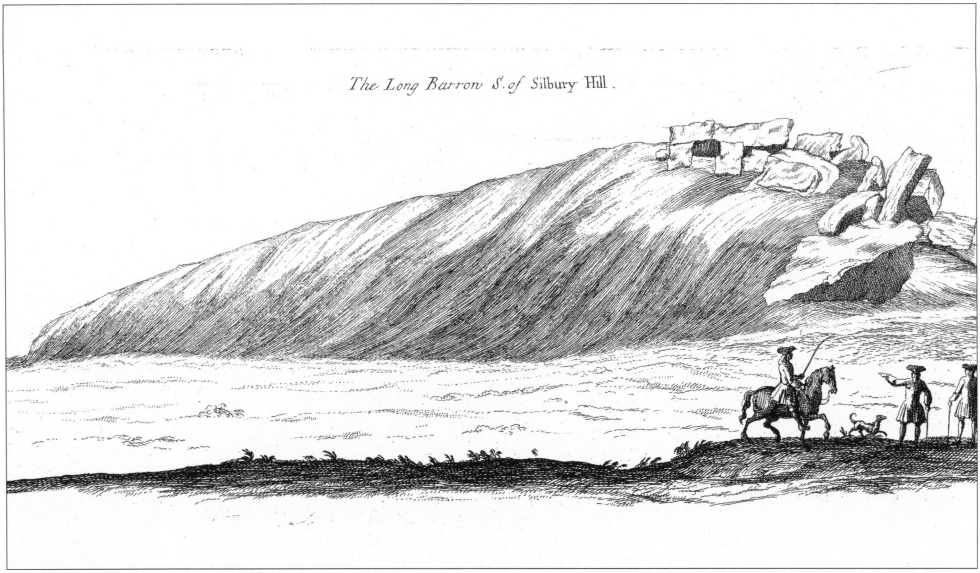
Silbury Hill

No wonder then that three tunnels have been dug into the hill. The first was in 1776 when the Duke of Northumberland and Colonel Drax hired a team of miners to sink a shaft from the top of the hill. The next was led by Dean Merewether on behalf of the Archaeological Institute in 1849 who tunnelled in from the side. Lastly, in 1968, the BBC and Cardiff University sponsored another tunnel running close to the second. None of these discovered any treasure although the last did uncover important structural details, and the remains of antler picks that were radio-carbon dated to around 2400 BC.

It was not simply a pile of chalk, but a complex and well planned structure built by people with an understanding of soil mechanics. The chalk was built up in six circular layers, each one smaller than the last, with a web of reinforcement walls to keep things in place. This arrangement, and the sloping sides of 60 degrees, meant that it was incredibly stable.

As the largest man-made mound in Europe it covers an area of 2.2 ha (5.5 acres) and stands 40 metres (130 ft) high. It would have taken 18 million man-hours to shift the 230,000 cubic metres (8 million cubic feet) of chalk to build it making it the most time consuming monument in the Avebury complex. After all its probing maybe it is the hill itself that was important.

Winged ants were found under the hill suggesting that construction began in late summer.



William Stukeley's view of West Kennet Long Barrow

West Kennet Long Barrow

From Avebury's main car park turn right and then upon reaching the roundabout turn left onto the A4. Silbury Hill's car park is on the left; you can either park here or, continue for ½ km (¼ mile) to the lay-by on the right. From the lay-by take the footpath over the water meadow and continue to top of the hill.

The long shape on the brow of the hill is one of the largest Neolithic burial mounds in Britain. Originally it was surrounded on three sides by a ditch that was 3 metres (10 ft) deep and 6 metres (20 ft) wide, and a semi-circular forecourt graced the entrance. Facing east, as it does, the early morning sun would have penetrated the barrow's gloomy interior.

The tomb's use spanned an enormous length of time, from maybe as early as 3500BC to 2000BC, when for some reason the chambers were filled with stones and soil and the entrance sealed with the large slabs of sarsen you see today.

When opened, the bones of numerous bodies were found in disarray. It is impossible to know how many as they were likely to have been laid here after

The bones of around fifty bodies were found scattered on the floor.

decomposition. There was a pile of vertebrae, heaps of long bones and some bones even poked into crevices, but mostly they just littered the floor.

In the first chamber on your right the only complete skeleton was found squatting in the corner. His death was almost certainly caused by the arrowhead embedded in his neck.

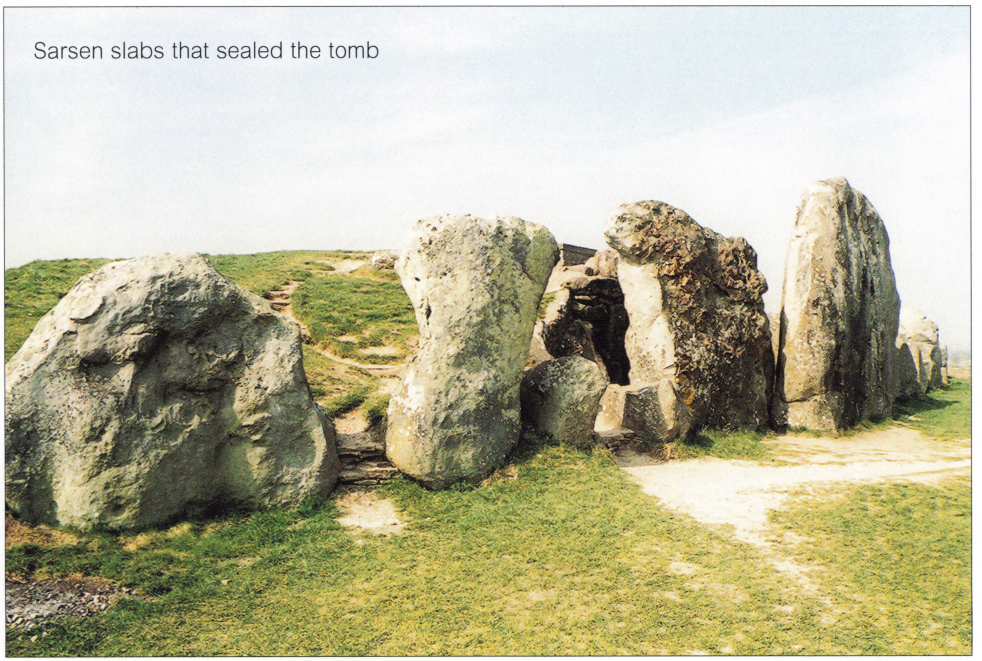
The stone passageway and chambers are the only accessible part of the tomb and occupies about a sixth of the 104 metre (340ft) barrow. It is supposed that the remaining part was constructed with wooden chambers but as yet has not been investigated.

A row of skulls was found in the second chamber on your left.

A local doctor used the bones he found in the barrow to make a medicine for his unsuspecting patients.

Although, in the late 1600's Dr Toope, nicknamed Dr Took, caused considerable damage to the barrow when he regularly dug into a side of the mound. He had found a good supply of human bones to make, as he put it, 'a noble medicine that relieved many of my distressed neighbours.'

Interestingly, the bones showed several cases of spina bifida and nearly all the adults had signs of arthritis.



Sarsen slabs that sealed the tomb

The Sanctuary

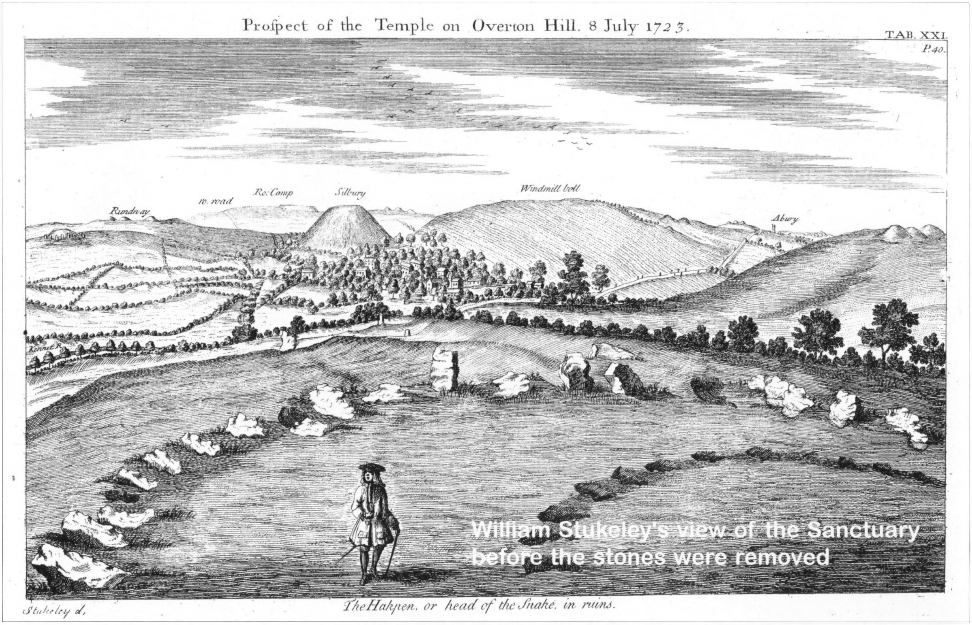
Turn left out of Avebury's main car park. Then take the first right onto the B4003 and follow the avenue to the T-junction. Turn left onto the A4 and The Sanctuary is on the right hand side of the road opposite the Ridgeway.

The Sanctuary today is a rather unimpressive monument when compared to Avebury's stone circles and Silbury Hill's great mass. In 1668 it was mentioned in Samuel Pepys' diary where he likened it to the building at Stonehenge. But now nothing is left of the original structure and its existence is only marked by concrete bricks arranged in a series of circles.

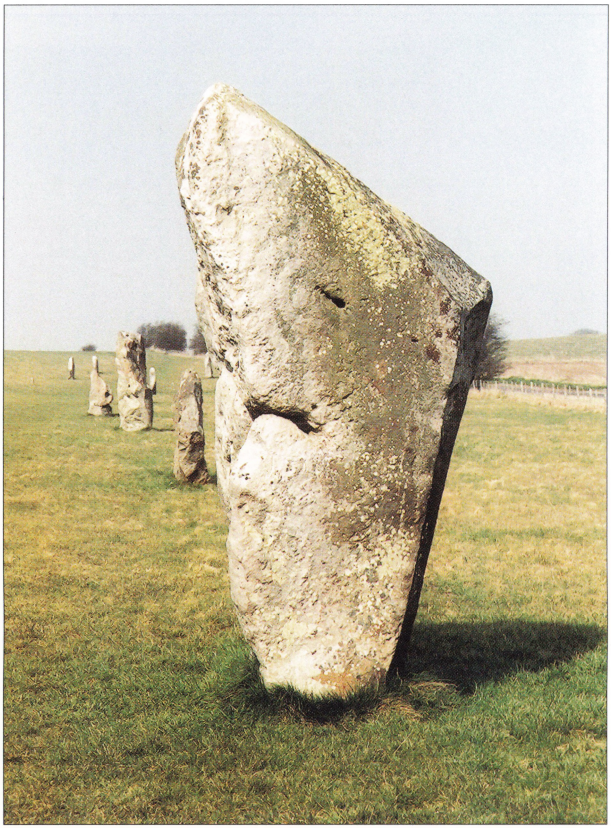
There were two circles of sarsen stones about 1.5 metres (5 ft) high accompanied by five smaller concentric circles made from wooden posts. It is uncertain whether these posts were free-standing or were part of the walls of a thatched hut.

The Sanctuary was probably used as a mortuary house.

Its importance is signified by the fact West Kennet Avenue connected it to Avebury. William Stukeley thought it was the head of his 'great stone serpent' but it was perhaps more useful than his fanciful representation. Due to the large amount of human remains found here its purpose was likely a mortuary house. The dead would have been taken here ceremonially to rot before some of the bones were interred in one of the barrows. Many of the bones found in West Kennet Long Barrow were scorched, and it is possible that this took place at the Sanctuary to hasten the decay.



William Stukeley's view of the Sanctuary before the stones were removed



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Avebury Avenues

Esther Smith

This colour guide offers a comprehensive look at Avebury's stone circle and the village that has grown up within its boundary.

The author has been involved with tourism within the Avebury area for over 20 years, and was prompted to write this book to give the visitor a greater understanding of this ancient site.

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